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HISTORY OF JUDEO-GERMAN LITERATURE

1890 ר.י. געשיכטע פון דער יידישער ליטעראטור ביזן יאהר Von
Dr. M. J. PINES. Warsaw, 1911.

Die Geschichte der jüdisch-deutschen Literatur. Von Dr. M. PINES.
Nach dem französischen Original bearbeitet. Von GEORG
HECHT. Leipzig: Verlag von GUSTAV ENGEL, 1913. pp. 253.

Originally written as a thesis for the doctor degree at the Sorbonne in 1910, under the title of 'Histoire de la littérature judéo-allemande', Dr. Pines's history has evidently met a need, to judge from the translations made of it. In 1911 the work appeared in a Yiddish translation by Dr. Eliashev, a critic well known in Yiddish literature under the pen-name of Bal-Mach-schovoth. A year later it was published in Russian, and in 1913 in German.

The astounding growth of Yiddish as a written language has been so rapid that many otherwise well-informed persons have not as yet realized its importance. A language spoken by about seven million persons, or a majority of the Jewish people, and as widely spread as Israel is dispersed, deserves considerable attention. Not that 'Jüdisch-Deutsch', as it is generally called in West-European Jewry, is a newly-spoken language, but its growth as a written, or rather printed, language and the evolution of its literature are so very recent.

The adoption of words from foreign languages is a necessary and common trait of all peoples, English itself being a most noted product of extensive adoption. The Jews have ever shown a propensity to adopt the language of the people surrounding them by writing the foreign words in Hebrew and by recasting the construction of the phrases into forms more suitable to the Jewish mode of reasoning. This is both a result of the great adaptability of the Jewish race to the economic and social demands of its environ-

ment and of the unique tenacity it has displayed in adhering to its own racial characteristics. In Aramaic the Jews recorded their legends, in Spaniolish they attempted to preserve their culture, and in Yiddish the Jewish people is expressing its innermost feelings and disclosing the fibres of its very existence.

A history of a Yiddish literature written by a man with first-hand knowledge of the material and the reading public at once starts forth under good auspices. Dr. Pines's work contains in its two volumes about 500 pages, and covers the history of Yiddish literature to the year 1890. Promise is held out of a continuation of the work. This is most desirable, as Yiddish literature has much expanded and flourished during the last decade; many writers have come forward and much poetic feeling as well as broad intellectuality have made their appearance.

The author at first discusses the origin of the language, the elements of its make-up, the existing dialects and its grammatical characteristics. 'The Yiddish language', says he, 'was born in the ghettos of Germany, but its development has received its definite character in those of Poland.' It is impossible to determine even approximately the beginnings of Yiddish as a language. Traces of its appearance begin to show faintly in the fourteenth century, but only in the sixteenth it began its real life. The author advances the theory that as long as the Jews who spoke 'Jüdisch-Deutsch' lived in Germany amidst a German-speaking population their language could not rise above a jargon. 'It could not free itself sufficiently of its German *milieu* and undergo that process of formation which should differentiate it radically from its mother tongue, impress upon it the spirit and the character of the people, and create a language which should differ from the German language as much as the Jewish people differs from the German people.' This creative work has been done by the German Jews who were compelled since the sixteenth century to emigrate to Bohemia, Poland, and Lithuania. To this should be added that the Jews found the state of culture of the latter countries much below that of Germany, which, naturally, made the immigrants adhere to their German traditions and language. Thus the

sixteenth century marks the real beginnings of Yiddish. In a comparatively short time German Jewish had conquered the Slavonic spoken by the many Jews who lived in Russia and the acquired provinces long before the formation of the Russian Empire.

The author takes up the beginnings of Yiddish literature as presented by the early popular stories of the sixteenth century, and the books of many a legend which made their appearance in the seventeenth century, and from which our grandmothers still derived their lore.

An interesting view is obtained of the Haskalah in Russia. It is an introspective view. It is the Haskalah movement in its effects, not on single individuals of distinction, but on the great numbers of poor Lithuania with its numerous and ardent students of the Law. The author's presentation of the maskil type is excellent—education based exclusively on Hebrew; autodidacticism with its inherent traits; the peculiar use of Yiddish with a forced injection of German words, and mainly a rather vulgar rationalism which formed the basis of action. A popular movement, the Haskalah has never been. The Jewish masses instinctively felt 'the egoistic basis of the Haskalah preaching,' which led to a separation of the masses from its aspiring intellectuals. Much has added to this attitude the dislike of Yiddish prevalent among the maskilim, a dislike which, in some instances, developed into hatred. This is more curious as the bulk of the maskilim spoke no other tongue, nor was there any other medium of communication between them and the people at large. Nevertheless, by force of circumstances, the maskilim contributed greatly to the spread of Yiddish literature.

Out of the maskilim also came the founder of modern Yiddish literature, S. J. Abramovitch. His first works were written in Hebrew and dealt with questions of education and literature; he also reworked into Hebrew a four-volume German natural history. Under the pressure of the maskilic atmosphere, Abramovitch underwent an inner struggle before deciding to write in Yiddish. Compelled by a sense of duty to his people he took up its language.

'Of what use', says he, in an autobiographic note, 'is all the intellectual and physical work of a writer if his own people get nothing out of it? . . . For whom am I working?' A series of novels on Jewish life are the life-work of the venerable father of Yiddish literature. In them he depicts Jewish life with a master-hand, and he obtains a deep insight into the workings of the Jewish soul. The vehicle of his expression, the Yiddish, he moulded and welded into literary form, its phrases he hammered and shaped to logical sequence, and its words he filed and polished to reflecting surfaces and sharp points. Thus Abramovitch created an expressive and elastic medium which enabled him to portray in his books the fleeting shadows of the Jewish psyche, and to represent that complex compound of deep religiosity and everyday empiricism, that unbounded optimism and defenceless living which made up the existence of the Russian Jew. The best chapter in Dr. Pines's book is the one devoted to Abramovitch.

The reactionary tendencies in Russia in the beginning of the eighties of the last century denote the expiration of the Haskalah. The intellectuals who put their faith in the blessings of a peripheral assimilation were awakened from their dreams by the icy chill of ill winds. Those of them who had warm beating hearts for their brethren returned to their people. The poet Frug was one of them. Recognized young as a promising singer whose racial plaintive note gave an additional charm to the fine ring of his rhyme, he achieved great success as a Russian poet only to turn to the language of the Jewish mass and to become a Yiddish poet. With him he brought to Yiddish poetry a graceful verse and a love of nature, a romantic yearning for past forms holy by their age and a fervent hope in the resurrection of the Jewish people in the land of its fathers. With Frug in Russia and Rosenfeld in America Yiddish poetry began its growth. The author devotes a chapter to each of them. He gives, however, no indication of the fruitful development Yiddish poetry has had since.

With J. L. Perez (his Stories have been published by the Jewish Publication Society) Yiddish literature has attained a depth of thought and height of conception never attempted before.

With Perez it has been placed in the ranks of the world literatures. The broad view of Perez sees the connecting-link between the old and the new; in the modern son of Israel he recognizes the spiritual brother of the hasidic enthusiast. Perez lays bare to our eyes the strong social fibre which makes of the Jews a people notwithstanding the lack of so many material bonds which usually hold nations together. He depicts before us that great affirmation of life with its optimistic faith which alone has enabled the Jewish people to uphold its spirit amidst an ocean of ignorance and barbarism. Without preaching and without sentimentality on his part we discover in the writings of Perez wherein lies the strength and the great resilience of our people.

Dr. Pines devotes considerable space to the evaluation of Perez's works and art. He falls, however, short in his appreciation of this great writer whose heights he does not scale.

Dr. Pines's critical work treats matters in an average way. The author gives a fair judgement but without display of brilliancy. He does not create atmosphere and his colouring at times becomes monotonous. The work is really a series of chapters on the history of Yiddish literature, incomplete and insufficient. The mere fact, however, that a two-volume work of serious purpose should prove incomplete is in itself an indication of the growth of the subject it treats of.